

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 11

Issue 1 *Winter/Spring* 2018

Article 3

January 2018

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Recommended Citation

Renesch, John (2018) "A Crisis of Commitment," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.111.1202>

Available at: <http://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol11/iss1/3>

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A Crisis of Commitment

— John Renesch, Co-Founder, *FutureShapers, LLC*, San Francisco, CA, USA

Individual and collective commitment to a cause has been the backbone of all major social transformations from the founding of the U.S.A. to putting a man on the moon, from changing the public attitude about drinking and driving to the ending of apartheid in South Africa.

Much of the positive developments in our history as human beings has been the result of true commitment. However, true commitment is one of the scarcest human qualities today. People say “yes” or make agreements every day that they hold as tentative in their minds, subject to whim and convenience. As a result, we live in a world filled with empty promises which lead to widespread social cynicism which, in turn, leads to lowered expectations. What people say is often quite different from what people do. As an old saying goes, “We judge ourselves by our intentions while judging others by their actions.” If we judge ourselves with the same criteria – our actions not our words – then we may start to see how culpable we are in this weakening of our social fabric.

It is so easy to give lip service to doing the right thing, stating the moral high ground, saying what people want to hear but an entirely different moral toughness is required to keep our word – to do what we say we are going to do. After years of hearing these tentative “commitments,” the rest of us have gotten used to people reneging on their promises and not keeping their word. The worst of it? It has become “socially acceptable”; that is, we have grown accustomed to people failing to do what they say and we let them off the hook. Empty promises have become quite common.

Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said,

“Commitment is what transforms a promise into reality. It is the words that speak boldly of your intentions. And the actions which speak louder than the words. It is making the time when there is none. Coming through time after time after time, year after year after year. Commitment is the stuff character is made of; the power to change the face of things. It is the daily triumph of integrity over skepticism.”

Do Lincoln’s words sound like an idle indication of interest subject to the big “if” – if something better doesn’t come along; if I still feel like it when the time comes; if it feels comfortable; if events align so as to make it easy; or if it isn’t too inconvenient? These are all tentative, conditional, and provisional – nowhere near “the power to change the face of things” as Lincoln suggested. All these ifs allow wiggle room for the person making the commitment.

Lincoln’s idea is that one’s character is made up by how one lives up to one’s commitments. As an antidote to this withering of our social fabric, I offer this model for encouraging true commitment from one another.

Sacred Pledge or Covenant

The dictionary defines a commitment as “an agreement or pledge” to do something in the future. A pledge is defined as “a binding promise” or “guaranty.” These hardly sound like casual, half-hearted promises. When persons guarantee something, they stand to lose something of value. When they make a promise, they have given their word. Implied in giving one’s word is a certain sacredness, similar to a sacred oath. This is what we call a “covenant” in my company; we ask members to make a sacred pledge to themselves and the other members of their group.

A higher standard for commitment instills character, consciousness, and meaning into one’s life and one’s work. I encourage us all to aspire to unconventional levels of awareness in what we say, how we say it, and what we mean by what we say.

In working with leaders on their covenants, we ask them to commit to the following actions:

- Seek self-transcendence, deepening self-examination/exploration, increasing their experience of equanimity and serenity;
- Be authentic; integrating mind, body, heart and soul; be consistent with their walk and their talk;
- Continuously self-examine personality traits that can be improved upon, stories and beliefs that limit them, and their attitudes and actions that negatively impact others;
- Do no harm: whenever they are wrong, promptly admit it and make amends for any harm they’ve done to anyone;
- Treat others as they would like to be treated (“The Golden Rule”);
- Seek out ways to be in relationships with a power greater than their own egoic mind;
- Spend at least 20 minutes each day in meditation/quiet time;
- Do the right thing always: whenever there is a question, follow their heart and their conscience, not their head;
- Be more compassionate for others and reverent about life, honoring their interconnectedness with all living things;
- Accept their leadership responsibilities as an honor and a gift, not an obligation or cause for self-importance;
- Consciously be a role model for others; and
- Create workplace cultures where these aspirations are honored and respected.

Guidelines for Making Commitments

Here are a few suggestions for making and keeping commitments:

1. True commitment requires passion. Does what you are committing to uplift you and make you come fully alive or does it burden and drag you down into dejection or despair? If you cannot find passion for something, then look and see what really upsets you and commit to changing that. Anger about a social condition or injustice suggests a passion for changing things.
2. Make the commitment explicit and public. Go on record in some public way so people who support you can hold you accountable for your commitment.

3. Be sure your commitment doesn't compete with another commitment you have already made – consciously or unconsciously. Harvard's Robert Kegan has written extensively about how subconscious commitments can conflict with those commitments we consciously choose, creating a competition or opposition which leads to frustration and inner conflict.
4. Believe you can achieve what you commit to. If you don't believe it can be done, you won't make the effort. Be realistic and not grandiose.
5. Be a *stand* for your commitment. Don't take a *position* against something. Positions invite opposition; stands are more powerful.
6. Embody your commitment. Be sure your commitment is not simply an idea in your head, a noble thought, but that it becomes part of who you are, part of your personality and way of living. Commitment lives in your heart or as *Merriam Webster* says "being emotionally impelled."

Something Bigger

Until one can truly commit oneself to something larger than oneself, one is destined to a life of mediocrity. Most people I can think of who committed themselves to something and went on to achieve remarkable results as a result will tell you they sought something larger than themselves, certainly larger than their ego or personality. This commitment might be the team in sports, one's company, country, industry or the entire world.

Values-based leadership assumes positive values. After all, Hitler had values but those values were not seen by the rest of the world as positive. Our current crisis in leadership ties to a crisis in commitment. We have all participated in bringing about this crisis. Leaders who fail to keep their commitments lower the bar and those of us who allow this to occur without calling our leaders to task allow that bar to be lowered. Our leaders are proactive in this crisis while the rest of us are passive and thus complicit. We stop expecting excellence and settle for mediocrity.

One of my favorite quotes about commitment is from explorer William H. Murray who wrote quite succinctly in his 1951 book, *The Scottish Himalaya Expedition*: "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness." As I mentioned at the start of this article, recent years have seen a collective backing away from true commitment and, what is even worse, we let people get away with it by not holding them accountable. Our passivity is complicit in this decline of commitment.

Let us stand for optimism about the future and hold one another accountable for the promises and the commitments we make. Perhaps we can restore our faith in one another and trust we mean what we say, keep our promises and stay true to our commitments. If we do, cynicism will fade and our collective attitude about the future will significantly improve.

About the Author



John Renesch is a businessman-turned-futurist, writer, and keynote speaker on topics that integrate the subjects of work, organizational and social change, and positive scenarios for the future of humanity. Having published 14 books and hundreds of articles on these subjects, he offers a variety of services as an international keynote speaker, private mentor/coach and advisor to consultants. In 2012, he co-founded FutureShapers, LLC, which hosts executive peer groups which focus on helping leaders become more conscious. His latest book is *The Great Growing Up: Being Responsible for Humanity's Future*, which received the 2013 Grand Prize for Non-Fiction by the Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

He's received much praise as a presenter and a visionary: Warren Bennis, international leadership authority, author and distinguished professor emeritus at University of Southern California: "John Renesch is a wise elder who shines with wisdom;" Stanford Business School Professor Emeritus Dr. Michael Ray: "John Renesch is a beacon lighting the path of the new paradigm in business;" and *The Futurist* magazine calls him a "business visionary."

More about John can be found at his website: www.Renesch.com.